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In R.I. Bad Driving is a Way of Life

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COMMENTARY/Chester E. Smolski

In R.I. bad driving is a way of life

A transplanted Rhode Islander, now living in Portland, Oregon tells an amusing story about Rhode Island drivers. Having lived in Oregon's major city for two years and driving there every day, she became accustomed to the good driving habits of the residents of that city and its suburbs, containing a population about 50 percent greater than that of the Providence metropolitan area. She claims that in those two years of driving she was never once frightened by someone cutting into the traffic lane in which she was driving, until recently. And then it happened, the car to her left cut into her lane, without a signal, nearly hitting her car and causing her to jam on the brakes. You guessed it — the car bore Rhode Island license tags.

What is it about this state's drivers that causes letters to appear frequently in the papers decrying our horrendous driving habits? Tail-gating, lane-cutting, driving without lights in the near dark, not using turn-signals, stepping on the gas at a yellow light and a host of other unsafe and poor driving habits appear to be the norm here but in other states would immediately get one in trouble. I know of what I speak.

While driving in Wilmington, Delaware several years ago, I made a left hand turn off of a one way street with four lanes. I was immediately stopped by a police officer when I made the turn from the second lane and given a \$25 ticket. When I pleaded that this was a common practice in Rhode Island, he politely informed me that a left hand turn is made from the left lane and not from any other, no matter where I did my driving.

Many states have their own little driving idiosyncrasies. For example, our long yellow traffic lights, when changing from green to red,, allow time for making a dash through before it turns red. This is why one is well advised to look in both directions before proceeding when the light turns green because too many drivers barrel through on red. In other states the yellow light turns quickly, so you slow down and stop on yellow.

Having just returned from driving in several cities of Kentucky and Ohio, I was made aware of the easier driving conditions found there. First, the roads are well marked so there is no question about which direction one can go. That is not true here.

Secondly, drivers are less aggressive. My son reminds me that he would be a nervous wreck after the 20-minute drive to work that he would take here daily as compared to the similar drive he now takes out in Portland. Third, drivers obey the law, so driving is predictable. Here, one never quite knows what to expect from that driver in front of you — whether it's running a light, cutting you off, not using a turn signal indicator or whatever — he or she is unpredictable.

What to do? What can be done to improve our driving habits?

First, roads need to be better marked,, and painting of road lines should be done more frequently. Lines should be painted in the fall so that the lane indicators will last through the winter when driving conditions are most difficult. Second, tougher law enforcement will make drivers aware that they must obey the law, and that includes dangerous and aggressive driving. Third, tougher driving tests. Have you ever heard of anyone failing a driving test in Rhode Island except, perhaps, because there was a language problem?

There are good automobile drivers in England,

and I make that statement on the basis of living and driving in that country for two years. The traffic moves fast — the English call it "driving smartly," but it is predictable. When approaching from the rear and you are in the passing lane, the driver will flash his light and you pull over to the side to let him pass. In Rhode Island, under the same conditions, the driver in the passing lane continues at his slow pace, does not move out of the lane and you have to switch lanes in order to pass.

The drivers in England are good because of tough enforcement of driving laws and because it is difficult to get a driver's license. One out of two applicants for a license fails, and have you heard of the woman who failed the driver's test 44 times before she was finally awarded her license?

Chester E. Smolski is Director of Urban Studies and Professor of Geography at Rhode Island College. His column appears monthly.